SOUTH AFRICAN ASSOCIATION FOR
MARINE BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH

OCEANOGRAPHIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Investigational Report No. 5

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Since 1940 there have been 45 shark attacks along the Natal South Coast—an area extending approximately 100 miles south of Durban. Sea temperatures in this area are generally high and large numbers of sharks are present throughout the year. East London is located 300 miles south of Durban where sea temperatures are generally much lower and fewer sharks are encountered close inshore. No shark attacks have been previously recorded there although 4 attacks have occurred in the area between the South Coast and East London.

A fatal attack took place at East London on February 1, 1961 and an account of this attack is given as follows:

Circumstances of Attack

The victim, Geoffrey Zimmerman, was a schoolboy aged 14 years. The colour of his skin was light, he weighed 105 lbs. and was 5 feet 2 inches tall. He wore swimming trunks with a pattern of large black and white diamonds and had previously had the nail of the third toe of his left foot removed and had taken off the bandage to go swimming. The wound was bleeding slightly when he entered the water.

The attack took place at Nahoon Beach, East London in water 4 feet deep and about 60 yards from the shore. The slope of the beach was gradual and there were no channels for a distance of 60 yards on one side and 150 yards on the other.

The attack occurred at 2.50 p.m., an hour before high tide. The sky was overcast and there was a S.E. wind at the time of the attack. The sea was clear but appeared dark due to the cloudy skies. The surface of the sea was disturbed by the wind.

The victim and three friends were swimming a little beyond a group of about 35 other bathers at distances of about 8 feet to 12 feet from each other when he started shouting and beating the water with his arms. At the same time the surface of the water near him became disturbed and red with blood. A shark was seen swimming towards him at least twice. On the first occasion only the fin was visible but the second time part of the body was seen and the shark seemed to roll on to its side.

Two of Zimmerman's friends went to his aid after the shark had disappeared. Shortly afterwards two lifesavers reached them and carried Zimmerman to the beach. He was apparently unconscious, being unable to hear anything, but spasmodically tried to sit up and to put his legs up and had to be held down. He also wished to lie on his side and complained of difficulty with his breathing although it appeared normal. His pulse was weak.

After 20 minutes he was taken by ambulance to the hospital, a few miles distant. On the way his breathing stopped, was restored for a short while but stopped again and he could not be revived.

Half an hour after the attack a fin was seen 300 yards off Nahoon Beach.

FIG. 1. Clean-cut Wounds on Victim's Legs.

DESCRIPTION OF WOUNDS

The victim had injuries on his right leg and foot, left leg and foot and left arm.

Right Leg—the flesh was removed in two places below the knee from the back of the leg in each case leaving the tibia exposed for about 2 inches. The edges of the wounds were clean-cut (see *Fig. 1*). The skin covering the tibia in front was extensively lacerated.

A further bite extended the lower wound laterally and left tooth marks across the heel.

Right Foot—the big toe was severed and lacerations were present on the arch and sole.

Left Leg—a single bite extended from the mid-thigh region to just below the knee. On the inside of the leg this bite consisted of 2 broad but superficial wounds with clean-cut edges and on the outside individual tooth marks were evident.

Left foot—there were lacerations on the heel.

Left arm—lacerations were present on the elbow and forearm.

It is likely that the shark bit the victim at least 4 times. No teeth or tooth fragments were found in the wounds and although the tibia of the right leg was scratched the toothmarks were not characteristic of any particular species of shark.

The flesh wounds had clean-cut edges similar to those of Petrus Sithole who was fatally attacked by a Zambezi River Shark *Carcharinus zambezensis* Peters at Margate, South Africa, in December 1960, Davies and D'Aubrey (1961). The skin lesions made by individual teeth were slit-like indicating that the wounds were caused by flattened *Carcharinid* teeth rather than the prong-like teeth of *Carcharias*. As other sharks with flattened teeth are seldom found in such shallow water it is likely that a species of *Carcharinus* was responsible for the attack.

The size of the sweep of the jaws of the attacking shark was indicated by the wound on the left leg and was $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches at its greatest width.

Conclusion

C.zambezensis is a common inshore species along the east coast of South Africa and has been proved to attack man. It is considered likely that the species responsible for the attack on Zimmerman was *C.zambezensis*.

C.zambezensis is a wide-mouthed species and the jaw size indicated by Zimmerman's wounds would have been caused by a specimen of approximate total length 7 feet and weight in the vicinity of 200 lbs.

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